

The top shelf: The censorship of Canadian children's and young adult literature in the schools

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Résumé: *Hugh Bennett s'ingénie à compléter ce qu'il appelle une "curiosité" bibliographique, c'est-à-dire la description anecdotique des cas de censure les plus médiatisés. Son projet se heurte toutefois à des difficultés majeures: les reportages sélectifs des médias, la rareté des études sérieuses sur le sujet et la délicate question de la différence entre la censure et la "sélection éclairée des livres".*

This bibliography is by no means a comprehensive list. Indeed it reflects only the best publicized incidents: because the formal removing of a book from a school rarely occurs, the very nature of censorship in the schools prevents this bibliography from ever being complete.

Sources for producing this compilation present further challenges. Newspapers, trade publications, newsletters and various library and education literature are the primary mechanisms for reporting censorship attempts, but the media can only describe incidents that come to their attention. Reporting is also selective and there is seldom any follow-up of initial accounts of trouble. A challenge to a book may be covered in a newspaper but the outcome of the dispute may never be reported.

What about sources outside of the media? The Writers' Union of Canada as well as the Book and Periodical Council (BPC) investigate incidents as they learn of them, but these bodies do not maintain comprehensive lists. Only some provincial writers' unions even maintain newspaper clipping files of locally-reported incidents.

What about studies? Formal investigations, such as David Jenkinson's "The censorship iceberg: the results of a survey of challenges in school and public libraries," are rare, and Jenkinson's study deals more with the school library than with the classroom where a significant amount of censorship may take place. A handful of commentators concentrate their excitement upon a few incidents, such as the *Impressions* battle in Manning or *The diviners* controversy in Peterborough. Most books removed from schools do not receive any publicity and often disappear without a trial or chance for appeal. As Penny Dickens, the Executive Director of the Writers' Union of Canada, tells me, the quiet removal of books is "much more of a worry":

Today school boards are usually too smart to ban outright any book. Rather what happens is that the book(s) in question just get quietly removed. To wit: when the Separate School System in Ontario reacted to Robert Munsch's *Giant; or waiting for the Thursday boat*, I do not believe any board actually banned it. As one superintendent said to me, 'It is in the system; where in the system I don't know, but it is in the system.' Well, I know very well where—it was either on the very top shelf of the library beyond the eyes of the children, or in a closet.... I can't prove that and the school system knows it.

In Toronto, Ian Wallace's *Chin Chiang* is actually "in a closet" and one wonders what other texts find a home on a top shelf in Essex County where teachers are instructed to "avoid selections which might provoke undue controversy" (Bruce 14).

The question of what constitutes censorship is the most difficult issue for a bibliography of this type. How does one define censorship? The problem becomes apparent in a case such as Robert Munsch's *Giant; or waiting for the Thursday boat* where teachers said they were concerned with the book's violence (Collins, "Giant problem" 110) and the overall quality of the story (Collins, "Munsch book" 24). Is this an instance of censorship or of good book selection? The issue can be further complicated by ulterior motives. In the case of *Impressions*, there are suggestions the controversy surrounding the series is less an issue of censorship and more a battle over the "whole language approach" (MacCallum, "U.S. fundamentalists" C2).

Despite the problems involved in producing this "curiosity," I hope the result of my work is more than a piece of mental chewing gum. Any discussion of censorship is productive since it brings into the open that which best survives in the closet.

Booth, David, editor, *Impressions*. This is a series of books, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, that contains literature from Canadian and foreign authors. In 1990 the Alberta Board of Education did not withdraw its approval for *Impressions* after a group called Parents for Quality Education complained of the series' "preoccup[ation] with violence, witchcraft and scary stories" (Ross B2). Some parents of children attending Rosary Catholic School in Manning, Alberta, asked the school and school board to replace the series because of the books' "underlying theme of death and morbidity" ("Alberta school" C1). The school board refused the request until June 1991 when the board agreed to replace the series within a year. During the first day of school in September 1991 a group of parents visited the school to state that if the books were not removed immediately they would burn them. The principal removed the books under the instructions of his superior and the board agreed to permanently remove the series and obtain a replacement (Sangster 1).

Buckler, Ernest, *The mountain and the valley*. The pastor of Calvary Temple in St. John, New Brunswick, and a minister/principal from Havelock campaigned publicly in 1978 for the removal of a number of books from the

province's schools. The works included *The mountain and the valley*, W.O. Mitchell's *Who has seen the wind*, *Canadian short stories* edited by Robert Weaver and Mordecai Richler's *Son of a smaller hero*. Buckler's book was condemned for "explicit sexual scenes" and Mitchell's work for using the word "goddamn." Only a few letters to the department of Education were sent and no official complaints were made. The Minister of Education defended the books saying that most of the titles were optional (Nolan 33).

Buffie, Margaret, *Who is Frances Rain?* The school librarian of Queenswood Public School in Orleans, Ontario, contacted the Canadian Children's Book Centre to inquire about a possible visit from an author during the 1990 November 3 to 10 Canadian Children's Book Week. Arrangements were made for Buffie to speak with the Grade 4, 5 and 6 classes at the school but the librarian thought some of Buffie's work inappropriate for their planned audience so the school obtained *Who is Frances Rain?* for evaluation. A Grade 6 teacher read a portion of the book to his class but the passage contained words such as "damn," "hell" and "bastard" and he identified the language as inappropriate for children at that level. As a result, the scheduled reading was cancelled and students could only obtain the book, through the principal's office, with written permission from a guardian (Collins, "Reading cancellation" 7). Shortly after the incident at Queenswood, the principal of Victoria Albert School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, afraid of "political" difficulties, cancelled a scheduled visit by the author. The cancellation occurred in spite of the fact that the principal did not read *Who is Frances Rain?* Buffie later commented: "I found out later that the school librarian heard about the Orleans banning and decided there might be 'problems' ...you can see how one incident will trigger off others" (Hancock 14).

Callaghan, Morley, *Such is my beloved*. Two ministers sought to have this book removed from Huntsville High School, Ontario, in 1972 (Birdsall and Broten 42).

Copp Clark Pitman, publisher, *Adventure series*. Under pressure from the Pentecostal Education Council in December 1988 the Newfoundland department of education forced Copp Clark Pitman to change a Grade 6 French textbook. So as not to "encourage the viewing of rock videos" a photograph of a rock group was deleted and song lyrics changed from "'Je ne peux pas m'empêcher de danser' (I can't help myself from dancing) to 'Je ne peux pas m'empêcher de chanter (I can't help myself from singing)'" (Jobb 6).

Doyle, Brian, *Hey, dad!*. The principal of St. Joseph Island Central School in Richard's Landing, Ontario, returned a number of copies of the book to Doyle's publisher in 1984. The accompanying letter explained that the books "promoted negative views and did not contain the values of 'positive citizenship' that the school was committed to teaching" (BPC III. 3).

Findley, Timothy, *The wars*. In 1991, a high school student from Northern Collegiate in Lambton County, Ontario, requested that the book be removed from her high school's English program. She said a passage that described the

rape of a Canadian soldier by his fellow officers during the First World War “pressur[ed] students to accept homosexuality.” The head of Northern’s English department defended the section as “symbolic of the psychological assault on the main character” and questioned the idea that the author or the readers of *The wars* “condone everything presented in the book” (“Student calls” C5).

French, David, *Leaving home*. The Board of Education in Simcoe County, Ontario, banned this book in 1981 and in 1988 it was not on the list of books approved for use in the county’s schools (BPC III. 3).

Geddes, Gary, editor, *15 Canadian poets*. A person in Estevan, Saskatchewan, challenged three books, including *15 Canadian poets*, in a high school in 1988-89. After the complaint was heard through the standard process, the anthology was not removed from the school library (BPC III. 3).

Heine, William, *The last Canadian*. The Grey County Board of Education, Ontario, banned *The last Canadian* and two other books in 1980. One trustee said the books were “secularist” and had “no reference to God.” Another trustee who objected originally to the books’ “profanity and vulgar language” later changed her mind after reading the works, saying “I think they’re good books.” Still another trustee said she voted against the books on the basis of what others said, but she “couldn’t get over what we’ve done” (Fluxgold 5). *The last Canadian* was returned to the board’s list of approved materials by 1988 (BPC III. 3).

Jespersion Press, *Themes for all times*. In 1989, the publisher of this Grade 12 English anthology being developed for Newfoundland high schools, was forced to modify or delete works including those by Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Antonine Maillet and Eric Nichol before it could be approved by the provincial department of education. Though the department of education’s curriculum committee had worked with the editorial team of Judy Gibson, Roy Bonisteel, Ron Clark and Betty King and gave approval to the text, the department’s director of curriculum instruction would not give final approval until words such as “hell,” “damn” and “for Christ’s sake” were deleted. Of the twelve items deemed to contain “offensive” words, the publisher negotiated with the department of education to reinstate six of them, edit four with the approval of the authors or copyright holders and delete two others (Jobb 6). On July 13, 1989, a censorship forum, organized by the Writers’ Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador, was held on the issue. A Grade 12 student argued “the objective of education at the senior high school level is to provide the student with the widest possible background” and “the alteration of the text in question amounted to a denial of the student’s fundamental freedom to read.” Kevin Major, also in attendance, said “the writer...does not promote or condone the language his characters utter; he uses language, rather, as a tool to depict, for our understanding and edification, the reality of human experience” (Dennis and Field 8).

Laurence, Margaret, *The diviners*. In 1976, the principal of Lakefield District Secondary School, Ontario, removed the novel from Grade 13 reading lists. The

head of Lakefield's English department said "there are 'some people' at the board who find the sex scenes objectionable" but "to teach Canadian literature without putting *The diviners* on [the book list] is hypocrisy" (Sallot 3). The Peterborough County Board of Education's textbook review committee later reinstated the novel despite a 4,300 name petition against the book (BPC III. 4). Later in 1976 the director of Education for Dufferin County, Ontario, temporarily removed *The diviners* from a list of books already approved for use in the high schools by a school board committee. He said the members of that committee did not "have sufficient knowledge to make a decision about the novel... [and] he withdrew the book temporarily to give trustees time to read it." The chair of the education committee which had approved the book "'hop[ed] the book was not removed just because of what happened in Peterborough'" ("Book is ordered" 9).

In March 1977 the Peterborough County Board of Education defeated a motion to remove *The diviners* from the approved text book list (Birdsall and Broten 49). In 1978 *The diviners*, a book "so shocking I can't quote from it," was challenged in the King's County Amalgamated School Board, Nova Scotia (Nolan 33). The work was neither being taught in King's county in 1988 nor was it on the list of books approved for use by the Nova Scotia Department of Education (BPC III. 4).

In 1978 the Catholic Women's League sought to have *The diviners* and two other novels removed from the English classes of Huron County, Ontario, high schools because the books contained "sexual references and objectionable language" ("School board urged" A11). In conjunction with school board officials and Renaissance Canada, an organization which leads a national campaign to remove objectionable material from the schools, the Catholic Women's League was successful in pressuring the Huron County Board of Education to ban *The diviners* (Connel 7) and restrict its use to optional Grade 13 English classes ("Trustees ban" 9). The school trustee who proposed the motion to ban Laurence's novel said "it struck me as a real filthy book" ("Huron County" 1) and the head of Huron's Renaissance group responded to those who felt the novel was a realistic portrayal of life: "there are people who use that language, I am sorry to say, but we should not be using it in our schools, not in English" (Connel 7). The Society for Freedom of Choice opposed the banning and asked school board officials to read the books they ban but the group was unsuccessful in having *The diviners* reinstated (BPC III. 5).

In 1982 a motion to stop using the book in high schools was defeated by the Etobicoke Board of Education, Ontario (BPC III. 5). A school board committee of the Peterborough County Board of Education rejected a call from a municipal councillor in 1985 to ban the "dirty, disgusting and degrading" novel *The diviners* as well as *A jest of God* and *The stone angel* ("Writer decides" E9).

Laurence, Margaret, *A jest of God*. An Etobicoke, Ontario, school board trustee attempted unsuccessfully to have the book banned from high school

English courses in 1978. He described the central theme of the work as dealing with two teachers "who had sexual intercourse time and time again, out of wedlock" and said *A jest of God* diminishes teachers in the student's eyes. Margaret Laurence accused the trustee of not reading and distorting the book: "I wish... [book banners] would not take excerpts and read only those out of context" and "I wish they would not be so oddly preoccupied with sex, which is only one aspect of life and only one aspect among many others within my novels, or the novels of any other serious writer" (Brennan A4).

Legér-Haskell, Diane, *Maxine's tree*. In February 1992, the International Woodworkers of America local complained to the Sunshine Coast, British Columbia school district that Maxine's tree was anti-logging and asked that the book be removed from school libraries until a similarly "emotional" pro-logging work was added to the collections (Bohn B7). The union acted on a complaint from one of their members who said his daughter came home from school one day and "told [him] what [he] did for a living [was] wrong...if [library books] are brought [into the classroom], they shouldn't be used as a means for teachers to discuss their personal points of view". The teacher-librarian who used the book said she "was teaching a unit on rain forests, not logging" so she did not feel it necessary to present a pro-logging view. The author of Maxine's tree was surprised at the commotion: "it's not an anti-logging book... it's really about how one person can make a difference." The board of trustees voted in March 1992 not to remove the work (Collins, "Controversy" 134).

MacLennan, Hugh, *Barometer rising*. The Manitoba School Trustees convention voted unanimously in 1960 to ask the department of education to remove the book from the classrooms, reading lists and libraries of the province's schools. *Barometer rising* had "no place in society, let alone in [the] schools" according to one of the delegates (Birdsall and Broten 19).

Major, Kevin, *Hold fast*. Kevin Major arrived at a school in Parry Sound, Ontario, during the National Book Festival in May 1982 only to find his scheduled reading of *Hold fast* had been cancelled by the principal (French 25). In 1988-89 an individual challenged *Hold fast* and two other books in a high school library in Estevan, Saskatchewan. The book survived the procedure for challenging material and still remains in the library (BPC III. 5).

Mitchell, W.O., *Who has seen the wind*. A group of 125 parents petitioned the Elgin County Board of Education, Ontario, in 1978 to gain permission to examine and review all literature and sex education material used in the classrooms, contained within the libraries, or listed as compulsory reading. The school board Chair indicated that the board would examine the parents' list of offensive material, which included *Who has seen the wind*, but the parents had only the right to examine and not to screen materials ("Parents advocate" 33).

Munro, Alice, *Lives of girls and women*. In 1976, the principal of Kenner College high school in Peterborough, Ontario, removed the work from the Grade 13 reading list. He "'questioned its suitability' because of the explicit language

and descriptions of sex scenes" (Sallot 3). A couple petitioned a high school in Toronto in 1982 to delete the work from the curriculum as they "objected to the 'language and philosophy of the book'". In 1984 the Etobicoke Board of Education, Ontario, defeated a motion from a trustee, who described the book as "porn, pure and simple," to remove the work from the high school English supplementary reading list (BPC III. 5).

Munsch, Robert, *Thomas's snowsuit*. An elementary school teacher in Lloydminster, Alberta, brought the book to the attention of the school principal in 1988-89 saying that it "undermined the authority of school principals in general." The book was subsequently removed from the library, though the librarian was not notified of the decision (BPC III. 5).

Munsch, Robert, *Giant; or waiting for the Thursday boat*. In March of 1990, a teacher from the Middlesex County Board of Education, Ontario, assessed *Giant* as being inappropriate for Grades 1 through 3 and her school board restricted the book's use in the primary grades unless written permission was obtained from a child's guardian. The teacher said she was concerned with violent references, such as "pound[ing] God into apple sauce" (Collins, "Giant problem" 110), but the public school board may have also felt uneasy in using a book with Judaeo-Christian themes. Renfrew County's board of education in Ontario was also reviewing the suitability of *Giant* for the classroom. The Niagara County separate school board banned the book in March since "the violence depicted toward God [was] something we [didn't] want to put across to the children" (McDougall 19). The controversy surrounding the book was further complicated by the fact that critics said *Giant* was "not one of [Munsch's] better books" (Collins, "Munsch book" 24) and the issue was more one of book selection than censorship. According to Robert Munsch the situation arose inevitably out of the diverse composition of our society in which items are acceptable to some people but not to others. Munsch chose not to defend his work: "like little children, there comes a time when a book has to make it on its own" (24).

Newlove, John, editor, *Canadian poetry: the modern era*. In 1987, a parents' group in Victoria County, Ontario, objected to the use of this anthology in the high school in addition to Margaret Laurence's *The diviners*, *A jest of God* and *The stone angel*, Cam Hubert's *Dreamspeaker* and Al Purdy's *Selected poems*. The school board decided that the book would remain part of the curriculum after the group's lawyer appeared before the board to request that the parents receive more information about books used in the schools (BPC III. 5-6).

Rekai, K., *The adventures of Mickey, Taggy, Puppito and Cica and how they discovered the Netherlands*. The Ontario Ministry of Education rejected this book in 1984 on the basis that it "contained 'examples of harmful female stereotyping'" (BPC III. 6).

Richler, Mordecai, *The apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. In 1976, the York County Board of Education, Ontario, rejected the recommendation of its

Standing Committee on Programs to remove the novel and one other book from the high school English curriculum. One trustee, who supported the recommendation, said "what comes in through the eyes and ears comes out through the mouth," while another felt it was the responsibility of the school board to ensure that the students were taught only the "highest values." A trustee against the banning noted that the books had been in use since 1970 without any problem ("No ban" 5). The Etobicoke Board of Education, Ontario, defeated a similar motion in 1982 (BPC III. 6). In 1990 a group of parents asked the Essex County Board of Education, Ontario, to remove *The apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* from high school reading lists because of "vulgarity, sexual expressions and sexual innuendoes" ("Writers alarmed" C1). As a "result of meetings with the schools' English department heads in response to objections raised by the parents' group" the school board issued a memo to high school teachers saying book "selections which might provoke undue controversy should be avoided" (Bruce 14).

Richler, Mordecai, *Son of a smaller hero*. A bakery worker and a Baptist minister campaigned in April 1978 to have a number of books, including *Son of a smaller hero*, Margaret Laurence's *The diviners* and Ernest Buckler's *The mountain and the valley*, removed from the reading lists of high schools in the Annapolis Valley/Kings County School Board, Nova Scotia. At issue was the passage: "his caresses could have been blows. Each time she thought that he was exhausted he managed to summon up energy again from the darkest places. Finally, however, he grimaced as though in great pain and rolled away into a corner of the bed" (Surette 8). In August 1978 the school board began revising its policy for selecting books (Birdsall and Broten 54).

Valgardson, W.D., *Gentle sinners*. In 1989, a parent complained to his son's high school English teacher of the "filthy, pornographic" (Jenkinson 6) nature of the book so the teacher offered the student an alternative novel. A flyer quoting passages of the work and encouraging parents to register complaints was later circulated by a parents' group. The school board voted in January of 1990 to accept the recommendation of an independent committee they established and leave *Gentle sinners* part of the curriculum. By April 1990 the board issued its final decision and upheld the teaching of the novel. The parents' group continued its campaign until the board voted in December 1990 that the book be reconsidered. The teacher withdrew teaching the book as a direct result of "submit[ing] the book, and indirectly himself, to review" (7). In an interview with Canadian library journal Valgardson lamented: "I think that the unfortunate thing, in our society, is that official organizations, such as governments at various levels—local, provincial, federal, whatever—respond to very small groups of people and are immediately prepared to destroy anything, no matter what it is, as long as it will satisfy a small and vocal group" ("Being a target" 18).

Wallace, Ian, *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance*. This picture book fell victim to a whispering campaign in Toronto public schools in 1991. A number

of officials in the system said the book contained “factual inaccuracies” about Chinese culture. Although *Chin Chiang* did not appear on any formal lists of material approved by the school board, the book was never ordered explicitly off the shelf by the board. One public school librarian noted: “they may not say to take it off the shelf...but you know if there is ever a complaint, we’re on our own...I might use [*Chin Chiang*] myself, and then explain it’s a nice story but culturally inaccurate and could never happen. It won’t be on the circulation shelf. It’ll be in my cupboard with the others” (MacCallum, “Following the twisted” E1).

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